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The Department of Civil Aviation's involvement with UFOs:1952-1973

From our previous research, we know that on 16 January 1951 the Federal Government Air Board issued a standard pro forma titled "Report on Aerial Object Observed" for the reporting of 'flying saucers' within Australia. (1) This form was replaced in January 1952, and again in November 1953. (2) These pro formas were utilised by all RAAF units and were part of one reporting system. However, there was at least one other Government agency, the Department of Civil Aviation (the DCA), which was active in collecting and collating reports. As will be seen below, yet other more secretive agencies seemed to also want to get into the act. How interested was the DCA in this era? Two references were found which bear on this question.

Firstly, in one of the earliest Australian books written about Flying Saucers:

"Officers of the Civil Aviation Department wanted to establish a special bureau to collect and collate facts about flying saucers. From Cabinet itself, however, came instructions that it was more properly a matter for the security services." (3).

Secondly, a news paper report titled "Hush ban on saucers" advised that:

"Australian Security Intelligence Officers have refused the Civil Aviation Department permission to investigate reports of 'flying saucers' Mr R M Seymour said tonight. Mr Seymour is Superintendent of Air Traffic Control. He said his department had planned to set up a special section to collate facts on "flying saucer" reports. Intelligence officials had told him that "flying saucers" were "security matters." Mr Seymour said "saucer" reports which he had collected followed the pattern of similar reports in the United States." (4)

In 1953, one of the Department's own high level staff filmed an unknown object. At 1200hrs on 23 August 1953 Mr T. Drury, the then Deputy Director of the DCA for Papua New Guinea, was in Port Moresby. In the cloudless south-western sky he noticed what seemed to be "cloud building up" which grew in intensity for several minutes. Suddenly,

an object appeared from one side of this cloud and climbed fast in a north-west direction. In size Drury said it seemed “slightly bigger than a pin head.” The soundless object left a clearly defined vapour trail. It “finally disappeared with a rapid gain of altitude.” Drury had a movie camera with him and filmed using a telephoto lens. The film was examined both in Australia by the RAAF and in the USA. (5)

The Victorian UFO Research Society published a research document in September 1978 titled “A compilation of reports from the Victorian Press” which gave an insight into the DCA’s interest in 1954. (6)

The Melbourne Herald of 5 January 1954 reported that Mr R M Seymour, DCA Superintendent of Air Traffic Control said “People who believe they have seen unusual objects in the sky should not keep the information to themselves for fear of ridicule...we do not regard this business as a joke. People are definitely seeing objects, some of which have not been explained.”

Mr Seymour was also quoted the next day in The Melbourne Sun as saying that:

“The best we can do at the moment is try to establish that an aircraft was in the vicinity when

the saucer was sighted. If we are unable to do that , then the report becomes inexplicable...” (7)

The exposure the DCA received from media items resulted in it receiving 24 reports on the 6 January alone! (8) By the 12 January, it was being reported that the DCA had received about 50 reports. (9)

The Melbourne Sun (13 January) reported that these reports to the DCA spanned nearly 30 years and that the DCA were checking the reports before forwarding them to the RAAF. A DCA official was quoted as saying that “Some highly qualified engineers in our department are convinced that there is something in the saucer mystery.”

So far, the Disclosure Australia Project has located only one DCA file which contains raw reports from this era. This is file series C273/227 control symbol 1957/619 which contains reports commencing on 14 June 1953 and extending to 24 February 1960. There are a total of 15 reports on this file, with eight being reported in 1954. Many are of the lights in the sky variety.

One interesting case on the file was that of the Mena Murtee Station photographs. Claims were made that a large saucer shaped object had been seen at the Station, and that three photographs were taken showing this object. The DCA conducted an investigation as demonstrated by various piece of correspondence on the file. The story as given was that at 4pm Tuesday last before 4 November 1954, a Mr Keith Weston of Mena Murtee Station, 18 miles NW of Wilcannia NSW had sighted an object. It was 500 feet from the ground, with an estimated size of 80-90 yards across. It came from the direction of Netalia and hovered over a wool shed on the Station. It was said that when it departed there was a sound like a loud explosion and a clanking sound. Three photographs were taken and developed at the homestead. It was the DCA who conducted the investigation, not the RAAF. Eventually, a Mrs Weston advised the Department (internal memo dated 10 November 1954) that: “...ask your Department to drop the matter, as it is a faked snapshot which was taken to have a joke with someone in Wilcannia and the matter has gone too far.” Thus the incident was stated to have been a hoax. Interestingly, in an internal memo dated 23 November 1954 the DCA Head Office stated: “If the photographs are genuine, they will be of considerable interest and a request has been received from American “Service” source for copies.” One wonders who these “Service” interests were?

Throughout the period 1954-57, the DCA was regularly forwarding reports it received on to the Department of Air. It utilised its own internal form labelled “Air Safety Incident.”

At 1944hrs on 27 September 1957 L. Stinson, an Air Traffic Controller reported seeing a white light bearing 025 degrees from the Launceston Tasmania Control Tower. The light was travelling southwards, at the speed of a DC3 aircraft. After 90 seconds, the light was abeam of the field and viewed through binoculars. Checks with area control revealed that there was no known air traffic or meteorological balloons. After 3 minutes it was lost to view from Launceston. The cloud base was at 4000 feet and the sky was overcast. Ground wind was from 300 degrees at 10 knots. At 1950hrs staff at Hobart airport received a request from Launceston to undertake a radar search. At 2024hrs an echo

was detected bearing 356 degrees at 34000 yards slant range at 5 degrees elevation, which moved at a fast speed. It was lost at 354 degrees at 17 miles, height 9-10,000 feet. (10)

RAAF files indicate that the DCA continued to refer reports, including ones from its own staff, throughout the period 1959-1963.

The subject of “unusual occurrences,” as the DCA sometimes referred to reports of ‘flying saucers’ or ‘UFOs’ made its way on to the agenda of a meeting on Air Safety investigations held between 26-29 November 1963. The minutes of agenda item 21 read:

“Reporting Unusual Occurrences. When a report of an unusual occurrence is received, and investigation indicates that it is not associated with any known aircraft, the report should still be communicated to Head Office in case it may be of interest to some other Authority.” (11)

Departmental staff themselves continued to report “unusual occurrences.” On Thursday 15 July 1965 six members of the Canberra Air Traffic control, employed by the DCA were involved in a UFO incident. At 10.50am T. Lindsay, an Air Traffic Controller, was looking for an aircraft, and reported seeing to the north-east “...a large yellow luminous balloon...It wasn’t Venus...I’m sure of that from the position.” Another controller, Tony Frodsham reported “...in colour it looked like a metallic object...After all that time-nearly forty minutes-it was gone, just like that.” (12) Officer-in-charge A.B. Lindeman said that the object was visible to the naked eye and was stationary at 020 degrees for 20 minutes. Binoculars revealed no further details. (13)

By the following year, 1966, the Department of Air was concerned at the publicity still surrounding the topic. Indeed, the Secretary of the Department of Air wrote to the Director-General of the DCA on 12 October 1966 as follows:

“Sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects have during recent months been receiving considerable publicity...Royal Australian Air Force is responsible for the investigation of reports...it is now considered that all authorities that could throw any light on these incidents should be officially associated with the investigation...Your agreement is therefore sought to the proposal that whenever the UFO investigation suggests that your department might be able to provide some assistance a copy of the ufo report should be sent for your comment.” (14)

The DCA responded on 26 Oct 66 that “We will be pleased to provide any assistance you require in connection with the investigation of reports on unidentified flying objects.” The DCA suggested using the same system as previously proposed for RAAF/DCA air safety incident reports. (15). The RAAF agreed, noting that the idea of RAAF bases liaising directly with the appropriate DCA Regional office was supported. In a memorandum dated 14 March 1967 (ref 21/1/387) the DCA Head Office in Melbourne wrote to regional offices. The memo advised regions that the RAAF investigated UFO reports and that “...all authorities that could provide any information should be officially associated with the investigation system.” DCA has agreed to participate and this memo sets out procedures.

If it wasn’t for the reporting system via the DCA, researchers would still not know about an interesting South Australian July 1967 CE2 case. A witness named Langsford of Robby’s Aerial Services was travelling by motor vehicle five miles NNE of Murray Bridge one clear night with thick ground fog. Suddenly, the car radio experienced interference. Within 100-150 yards the vehicle’s engine stopped by itself. Although the ignition was on, the dash warning lights came on. Looking up he saw a “large dark shadow” at an estimated height of 20 feet. Above the shadow was a greyish-blue glow. He stopped the vehicle but shadow and light had gone. Returning to the car he started the engine; switched on the radio and found there was no interference. (16)

Two years later, a radar visual event occurred on the 23 May 1969 which involved a DCA radar operator at Kalamunda WA. At 1835hrs two civilian witnesses saw a moving light which travelled from 10 degrees S, through the SE to the E then to the N of them. It appeared as a steady red light on top of a blue-white light. Finally it settled in a stationary position 10-15 degrees bearing 015 degrees. It was described as circular, half the size of the full Moon. It was there for 15-20 minutes before, at 1900 hours it moved off at high speed to the N/NE. The female witness at 1901hrs telephoned Kalamunda radar. On checking the radar screen the operator saw a large echo 9 miles distance at 300 degrees. This meant it was some 2.5 miles N of the civilian witnesses. Contact was held for 30-40 seconds. The echo appeared for

short instances on five occasions and finally disappeared at 1942hrs. Interestingly, despite the radar having Moving Target Indicator which meant that it suppressed targets moving less than 6 knots. The target had no noticeable displacement. (17)

Other 1969 events involving airline pilots were:

18 Jan 69 on a flight between Singapore and Perth airline Captain Morris tracking 157 degrees True. The plane was at 35000 feet in a Boeing 707. He reported a yellow/white light which descended from 0 degrees to minus 2 degrees. The object gradually fell behind the aircraft. The duration of the event was 5-10 minutes (18)

5 Feb 69. An airline pilot Tillotson was at Ferny Creek, Vic at 2350hrs. He reported seeing a bright white point source travelling 5 degrees/minute soundlessly W to E. It was lost behind a hill (19).

22 Apr 69. A pilot named Hill was over Bass Strait at 1991hrs. A green light was initially seen at 60 degrees elevation and lost in mid-air at 30 degrees at 240 degrees T. Another pilot Rayment at the same time over Bass Strait reported a bright white round balls in the sky with 2-3 very small incandescent balls trailing (20).

5 Aug 69. While 18nm NW of Melbourne, an airline pilot, first officer and 2 hostesses at 18000 feet saw a green fluorescent light 30 degree to port at 20-30 degrees elevation. It was 2-3 times the size of the full Moon. (21)

More airline crew reports continued in 1970:

On 23 May at 1810hrs Captain Knott of an ANA DC9 flight 200nm SE of Townsville reported a beam of light in the direction of Alice Springs. It was pale yellow in colour. It was vertical and stationary. The pilot of a nearby TAA DC9 also saw it. (22).

On 29 June, Keog, the pilot of a F27 aircraft on descent from 12500 feet noted echoes on radar 60 degrees abeam. The echo appeared to be 60nm from his aircraft and keeping station with him. These were five cigar shaped objects. DCA advised there were no aircraft in the area (23)

A pilot Harrington was at 8500 feet 40nm SE of Katherine NT on 22 July at 2130hrs. He sighted two objects for two minutes, one vertically above the other at 270 degrees relative. In colour they were red and green and level with the aircraft. It moved through 10 degrees in 20 seconds. (24).

After at least 20 years of involvement in processing and investigations into "Unusual occurrences", the DCA was abolished in 1973 and its function taken up by the Air Transport Group of the Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOT).

References:

(1)National Archives of Australia: PP474/1, 5/5/Air p2.

(2)National Archives of Australia: A11250, 5/1/Air part 1 pp1-4.

(3)Holledge, J. 1965. Flying Saucers Over Australia. Sydney. Horowitz. p31.

(4)National Archives of Australia A11066, 5/1/27 Part B p17 has a copy of a news clipping from the Daily Telegraph Tuesday 6 May 1952.

(5)National Archives of Australia: 114/1/197.

(6)Fischer, R & Bristol, L. (1978). The Victorian UFO Report 1954. VUFORS. Melbourne.

(7)Melbourne Sun. 6 January 1954.

(8)Melbourne Age. 7 January 1954.

(9)Melbourne Sun. 12 January 1954.

(10)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 1 pp53-57.

- (11)National Archives of Australia: J23/35, 1970/3877 Part 1 p3.
- (12)Holledge, J. 1965. Flying Saucers Over Australia. Sydney. Horowitz. p11.
- (13)Hervey, M. 1969. UFOs Over the Southern Hemisphere. Sydney. Horowitz. p49.
- (14)National Archives of Australia: A703, 554/1/30 Part 1 p214.
- (15)National Archives of Australia:A703, 554/1/30 Part 1 p234.
- (16)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 8 pp178-184. Air Safety Incident Report ISN 663/67.
- (17)Chalker, B. unpublished manuscript 2002 citing copy of a report from O H Turner.
- (18)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 11pp83-86.
- (19)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 11 pp33-36.
- (20)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 11 pp208-211.
- (21)National Archives of Australia A703, 580/1/1 part 12 pp101-107.
- (22)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 13 pp109-111.
- (23)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 13 p53.
- (24)National Archives of Australia: A703, 580/1/1 part 13 pp62 &27-32.

The Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOT)

As mentioned above, the Department of Transport and Regional Services took over the role of the former Department of Civil Aviation. As the Archive Act currently only reaches until 1973, any searching for DOT files, by necessity, has to be undertaken utilising the Freedom of Information Act. Therefore recently, the project Secretariat submitted its third FOI request to Government (the first two were to the RAAF) asking for copies of any documents that the DOT holds on UFOs.

The decision maker for the request, Rob Graham, Director, Safety Investigations, stated that:

“A thorough search has been made and to the best of my knowledge this decision covers all documents relevant to the Freedom of Information application made...This FOI request seeks access to documents concerning unidentified flying objects held by the Department of Transport and Regional services including the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB). The relevant documents from a search of the ATSB’s OASIS aviation occurrence database are listed below with a decision on access under the Act.

Nine cases were located in the database and these are listed below.

Occurrence number 196901691

Occurrence id 129813. 2 July 1969 “Burn marks rep on 2 golf courses. Reported as poss UFO landing. RAAF notified.

Occurrence number 196902473

Occurrence id. 130595. 31 Jan 1969. Diamond Creek Vic. Rep sighting a UFO white in colour moving very fast in a straight line.

Occurrence number 197502943

Occurrence id 91062. 12 Jan 1975. Albury NSW. UFO sighted on radar at 20000ft in CTA. Not possible to identify.

Occurrence number 197703195

Occurrence id 77512. 16 Apr 1977. Near King island Tas. UFO report from pilot. Passed to RAAF for study. CFT beacon abeam VH-KRY. Cessna 401.

Occurrence number 197802563

Occurrence id 70857. 21 oct 1978. Near cape Otway Vic. Plt reported UFO then rough running eng. TX ceased-ACFT missing. Cessna 182L.

Occurrence number 197904600

Occurrence id 66734. 22 Sep 1979. near Banka Banka NT. Object in area. Search ACFT found burnt trees and white ash but no object. (Sneaky Martians?) Misc UFO consisting of white light trailing smoke. Sighted by three witnesses. F27 Plt reported white.

Occurrence number 197904657

Occurrence id 66791. 19 Oct 1979. Near Broken Hill NSW. Acft, however no known aircraft in area. Misc F27 crew sighted UFO whilst on climb out. Flashing white light similar to strobe on high flying Fokker. B.V. F27 Mk 200.

Occurrence number 198300234

Occurrence id 40550. 7 Apr 1983. Near manly West Qld. No known acft or balloon activity in area. Inside radar coverage but no radar return. UFO reported silvery object size of Cessna without wings flying from east to west at 2000ft.

Occurrence number 199804923

Occurrence id 164236. 8 Nov 1998. 28km NW Perth, Aerodrome. WA. The pilot reported an unidentified flying object, bright red/orange in colour 100ft below and travelling very fast as the aircraft passed 9,000ft. Then object was approximately 2 metres across and the pilot believed that it may have been a model aircraft.

Contacting the Project

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